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EDITORIAL

## Touch-and-Go Elections

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ARE TOUCH-SCREEN voting machines fast and flawless, or glitch-prone and vulnerable to tampering? No one can say for sure, which is reason enough for Maryland and Virginia localities to conduct more extensive testing before totally embracing the new systems they have inaugurated with mixed results. On Tuesday it took Fairfax County more than 21 hours to get final election results from its new computerized machines; when all was cast and done, enough doubts existed to prompt legal action by some Republicans who lost.

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Any possible malfunctions seem unlikely to call results into doubt. But questions about reliability remain, and the absence of a paper trail makes checking difficult. Attorneys for the GOP went before a Circuit Court judge Wednesday, asking him to keep 10 voting machines under lock and key. The machines, from nine precincts across the county, broke down about midday and were brought to the county government center for repairs and then returned to the polls. The judge said the activity logs of these machines will be inspected, with members of both parties on hand. The challengers noted that whether a contest is affected or not shouldn't be the chief question; ballot integrity is at issue. A number of Fairfax voters complained that it took them several tries to register their votes. A few precincts were forced to return to paper ballots.

In Maryland, where four counties used touch-screen machines in last year's gubernatorial election, the system rightly remains under review. Though a handful of cities and towns used the new machines Tuesday with no major glitches reported, the state still ought to verify the suitability of its voting mechanism. A report by the Information Security Institute at Johns Hopkins University cited numerous vulnerabilities in the touch-screen technology,

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problems denied by the manufacturer.

Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) ordered a review by San Diego-based Science Applications International Corp., which reported last month that the system, "as implemented in policy, procedure and technology, is at high risk of compromise." Some lawmakers have raised questions about SAIC's relationships with other voting technology companies and want legislative analysts to examine the examiners. A spokesman for Mr. Ehrlich says the governor is satisfied with the report but welcomes any additional efforts to "validate the maximum integrity of Maryland's voting system." Nevertheless, the governor and state elections officials have said they will proceed with the purchase of machines made by Diebold Election Systems, and that they believe the troubles can be taken care of before the machines go into use for the state's presidential primary in March.

Why leap? In Maryland and Virginia, independent reviews ought to proceed. In the meantime, before any more elections, touch-screen systems at least should be outfitted with printers that can produce accurate paper records of votes cast. The technology exists and ought to be pursued.

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